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National Council of Churches

Diplomatic Relations WITH THE Vatican

Part I

*The Position of the National Council
of Churches*

Part II

*A Brief in Support of Maintaining a
Valuable American Tradition*

Foreword

NATION-WIDE CONCERN was aroused by the action of the President of the United States on October 20, 1951, in nominating an ambassador to the Vatican. On October 31, 1951 a special meeting of the General Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America was held for the purpose of defining its position. The official statement unanimously adopted at that time appears in the following pages as Part I.

An earlier statement had been approved by the General Board on January 17, 1951, setting forth the basic considerations on which the opposition of the National Council of Churches to diplomatic relations to the Vatican was based. This document was entitled "A Brief in Support of Maintaining a Valuable American Tradition." In the following pages it is printed as Part II and should be read in connection with the more recent statement.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST
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Part I

The Position of the National Council of Churches

Official statement unanimously adopted by the General Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A., October 31, 1951

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America is profoundly disturbed by the controversial issue that has been precipitated by President Truman's nomination of an ambassador to the Vatican. As Christians and as Americans we repudiate prejudice against Roman Catholics and deplore religious dissension. This issue now thrust upon us, however, forces us, because of conscience, to protest against what is to us an alarming threat to basic American principles. We believe that the appointment of an Ambassador to the Vatican would be wrong in principle, useless in practice and would produce consequences both far reaching and disastrous to the national unity of the American people.

By taking a step which arouses religious controversy, the President has done a grave disservice to our country. We are especially distressed by the published reports of his suggestion in a press conference that this is a time to "fight it out." It is normal and wholesome in a democracy to "fight it out" on political issues; but this is different. Religious convictions lie deeper than politics.

Authorized and representative leaders of great bodies of American Christians have made it unmistakably clear on frequent occasions since 1939 that the question of sending an ambassador to the Vatican is a seriously divisive matter. Conscience and conviction with regard to religious liberty, combined with loyalty to an essential principle of American democracy and gratitude for a national tradition consistently defended by our fathers, have compelled us to take a resolute position. The President has known this through an extended correspondence and consultation over several years. We are making the record public in a separate document.

This issue is not of our making. There had been no public controversy over the matter in recent months. The situation was quiescent and might have remained so except for the President's action. We now have no choice but to be loyal to our deep convictions and to the national welfare as we see it.

Three major reasons are advanced in support of the President's proposal, none of which bears scrutiny.

It is alleged in the first place that the United States should establish formal diplomatic relations with the Vatican in order to gain access to an unique source of information, achieve effective cooperation against

communism and advance the cause of peace. The fact is that formal diplomatic relations constitute no binding agreement for either party to reveal any information except what it chooses to reveal. On the other hand, if both parties desire that all resources of information be utilized and coordinated against communism, this can be achieved through our ambassador to the government of Italy, who is resident in Rome and readily accessible to the Vatican. Eager allies in a common cause are not frustrated in their common efforts by considerations of protocol or prestige.

All Christian bodies stand together in opposition to communism. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America holds unequivocally that communism, in its basic philosophy and in its practice of disregarding many essential human rights, is opposed to Christianity. Our conviction in this matter has already been stated in these words:

"It (communism) is atheistic in its conception of ultimate reality and materialistic in its view of man and his destiny. Its utopian philosophy of history lacks the essential Christian notes of divine judgment, divine governance, and eternal victory. Its revolutionary strategy involves the disregard of the sacredness of personality which is fundamental in Christianity. Such differences can never be resolved by the compromise or surrender of faith by Christians."

We continue to stand ready to cooperate with Roman Catholics and other men of goodwill in working for peace. We have worked with them in the past and intend to do so in the future. We work also with our government in informal but effective cooperation without any necessity for any legal diplomatic agreement. Our constituent bodies are related to the World Council of Churches which has similar channels for international cooperation in the furtherance of peace.

The second reason given for the President's proposal is that there is precedent in American history, notably in the middle of the last century. The fact is that the present proposal for an ambassador to the Vatican is without precedent. The Chargé d'Affaires of the United States accredited to the Papal States in 1848 was instructed to deal "exclusively" with civil and commercial matters with a state which comprised some 16,000 square miles of territory and a population in excess of 3,000,000. In contrast, the present "State of Vatican City" comprises an area of one-sixth of a square mile and a population of some 1,000. It has no civil courts or civil administration distinguishable from ecclesiastical authority. It should be remembered that in 1867 Congress cancelled appropriations for the representative to the Papal States in response to public indignation over the reports of a prohibition of public Protestant worship within the city walls of Rome. The protest was against the infringement of religious liberty and in support of the separation of church and state.

The third reason offered in support of the President's proposal is that other nations send ambassadors to the Vatican. This is a most unsound

argument for abandoning our distinctive American tradition which has served us well. Most of the other countries that have diplomatic relations with the Vatican give special recognition and status to the Roman Catholic Church and recognize the diplomatic representatives of the Vatican to their own capitals as deans of the diplomatic corps. Our nation on the other hand has always refused to give any church preferential status.

The President's action precipitates precisely the kind of situation which our forefathers sought to prevent in the interest of the national welfare by constitutional separation of church and state. To establish formal diplomatic relations with the Vatican would be to concede to one church, the head of which has only nominal secular power, a political status in relation to our government which could not possibly be given to all churches and which could not, as a matter of principle, be accepted by most. Thus tension and controversy would be induced in our national life at the very time when unity is most essential.

We reaffirm our approval of the *Brief in Support of Maintaining a Valuable American Tradition* which was submitted to the President and the Secretary of State on October 31, 1950 on behalf of an even more inclusive group of churches than the twenty-nine constituent to the National Council. We commend this brief to the public.

We earnestly express to the President and the Congress our conviction that only a prompt withdrawal or rejection of the President's proposal can save this country from a most unfortunate and unnecessary controversy, with reactions that will be cumulative as the issues become more widely recognized. We did not choose this controversy. We deplore it. But we cannot and will not evade it. We have been in the past and will continue to be in the future unalterably opposed to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

Part II

A Brief in Support of Maintaining a Valuable American Tradition

Approved by the General Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A., January 17, 1951.

SEPARATION of church and state was established as a distinguishing and characteristic principle of American democracy by our Constitution. It has become an essential feature of the structure of our society, the cornerstone of our religious liberty, which is the most basic of all liberties. Guaranteeing equality of rights to the various sects, with discrimination against none,

it has been an essential feature of our way of life, which has been blest with tolerance and unity. Our people, though gathered from many nations, with different cultural and religious backgrounds, have been singularly free from religious strife.

As Christians believing in the freedom of conscience and as Americans believing in our national traditions, we are deeply and resolutely committed to the separation of church and state as a sound principle amply verified by our experience.

In conformity with this Constitutional principle, the Government of the United States of America has never in its history established formal diplomatic relations with the Pope as head of the Roman Catholic Church. Relations with the Papal States were quite a different matter.

From 1797 to 1848 the United States had consular representation in the Papal States as a temporal power. From 1848 to 1868 more formal diplomatic relations prevailed, including a period from 1854 to 1868 when a Minister Resident of the United States was accredited to the Papal States. Jacob L. Martin was commissioned as Chargé d'Affaires on April 7, 1848. His instructions from Secretary of State James Buchanan, dated April 5, 1848, contained the following passages:

"There is one consideration which you ought always to keep in view in your intercourse with the Papal authorities. Most, if not all, the Governments which have Diplomatic Representatives at Rome are connected with the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church. In this respect the Government of the United States occupies an entirely different position. . . . Your efforts, therefore, will be devoted exclusively to the cultivation of the most friendly civil relations with the Papal Government, and to the extension of the commerce between the two countries. . . ."

"Our direct relations with the Papal States can only be of a commercial character."

The last Minister Resident of the United States accredited to the Papal States, Rufus King, resigned on January 1, 1868, after Congress had stipulated that no appropriations should be paid for the support of the legation after June 30, 1867.

It should be noted that the representation of the United States during that early period was to a temporal state to deal "exclusively" with civil and commercial matters and on a basis distinctly different from the representation of other governments that were connected with the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church.

In 1902, William Howard Taft, then civilian Governor of the Philippines, was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to negotiate at Rome for the purchase of the Friar's Lands in the Philippines and for the withdrawal of the Friars from the Islands. This did not involve the establishment of formal diplomatic relations

Mr. Myron C. Taylor's status in Rome, from 1940 to 1950, was entirely different from that of earlier diplomatic representatives in two respects: First — he was appointed the personal representative of the President rather than the authorized and accredited representative of the Government of the United States of America. Second — he was sent to His Holiness the Pope, rather than to the no-longer existing Papal States. President Roosevelt, President Truman and the State Department have repeatedly maintained that this action did not signify the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

Obviously, the civil and commercial interests of the Papal States in the middle of the nineteenth century have no counterpart in Vatican City today. Before 1870 the Pope was both Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church and the sovereign of the Papal States, at that time a substantial territorial power. From 1870 to 1929, when a new settlement was reached with Italy in the Lateran Treaty and the Concordat, he had no temporal power. In the latter year he was recognized by Italy as sovereign of Vatican City. Vatican City has an area of one-sixth of a square mile and a population of about 1,000. In 1859 the area of the Papal States was 16,000 square miles; in 1853 their population was 3,124,758.

The Pope's influence is not derived from his status as sovereign of Vatican City. It is derived from his status as head of the Roman Catholic Church. His representatives overseas derive their status from their authority in that church rather than from the civil or commercial power of Vatican City. Diplomatic relations with the Pope, or technically with the Vatican, are therefore, in effect diplomatic relations with the head of a church, with the Roman Catholic Church itself.

To give one church a preferential status in relation to the American Government would set aside the principle of according all religious bodies the same status in the eyes of our government. Such a departure from our historic past might even lead — though not intended — to an ultimate acquiescence in the doctrine enunciated by the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on "The Christian Constitution of States" which bluntly declared that "It is not lawful for the State to hold in equal favor different kinds of religion." What this encyclical condemns is what the United States has practiced.

Our objection to diplomatic relations with the Vatican would not be modified by any proposal to establish similar diplomatic relations with other religious bodies. It would not be practicable to establish diplomatic relations with the world headquarters of all religious groups. Furthermore, even if it could be done, it should not be done, because to extend the scope of a wrong policy would not make it a right policy and we would oppose such a suggestion just as vigorously as we oppose the proposal to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Effective collaboration between church and state, when it is mutually desired, is achieved appropriately

in the American tradition without legal formulae of recognition and regulations.

To propose establishing formal diplomatic relations with the Vatican today is to propose a step that is without precedent in American history. Furthermore, it is to propose an action which would be contrary to the constitutional and traditional American principle of separation of church and state.

Nearly every major Protestant group in the nation has taken official action opposing any kind of diplomatic relationship with the Vatican. There has been no question of public policy during recent years on which there has been such widespread and unequivocal expression of concern by Protestant bodies. Other groups interested in maintaining the American pattern of freedom, including Jewish groups, have taken the same position.

It has been argued that representation at the Vatican would strengthen America's defense against communism. The constituents of the Protestant Churches yield to no one in opposition to communism and in loyalty to freedom. Their record in the history of this country and to the present day is clear and they are proud of it. They hold that the menace of any totalitarianism is a challenge to us to maintain and defend our institutions of freedom and not to compromise them. This time of challenge is a time to maintain them in their integrity unimpaired. In our tradition, separation of church and state is one of the essential bulwarks of our freedom. It would be a national disaster to abrogate this American principle and to jeopardize our unity.

It is regrettable that it should be suggested that the cooperation of the Vatican with the United States in opposing communism might be conditioned upon the establishing of a particular legal pattern of diplomatic relationships between them. We cannot believe that any power, governmental or ecclesiastical, that is deeply troubled by the menace of communism, can fail to find adequate and appropriate ways of making useful information and resources of influence available to others in combatting that menace. Surely the particular channel of formal governmental diplomatic relations is not necessary to achieve effective collaboration between religious groups and states. This fact has been proved in the history of the United States.

America must be kept strong in its traditions and institutions of freedom. They have served it well through an honorable history.

We therefore, urge that no attempt be made to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

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